

MOTIVATION AND AUTONOMY IN TRADITIONAL VS. ONLINE CLASSES OF ENGLISH FOR MEDICAL PURPOSES

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Abstract The present study aims at analysing the extent to which motivation and autonomy shape the process of learning English for medical purposes (EMP). This research paper was designed to investigate the connection between students' motivation and their autonomy level in the context of online training during the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to the traditional classes. A quantitative approach was developed to explore students' motivation to learn EMP by means of technology-enhanced training. The article presents the data obtained and represents a point of departure for exploring more effective methods of using technology to both motivate medical students and enhance their autonomy in learning EMP. Furthermore, it generates a basis for designing EMP courses in an effort to encourage self-regulated learning.

Keywords Motivation, Autonomous Language Learning, Learner Autonomy, English for Medical Purposes, English for Specific Purposes.

1. Introduction

Any learning process is indissolubly based on several fundamental aspects, among which motivation and autonomy. Academic motivation can be regarded as the psychological mechanism that generates learning behaviours which lie at the heart of any educational undertaking. Besides producing the urge to acquire new information, it helps learners to maintain concentration and employ various learning strategies. While the acknowledged need for EMP acquisition stems from a motivational core, autonomy is the learner's ability to engage in the learning process in an independent and responsible manner. In fact, most definitions are convergent and agree on three salient aspects of autonomy: responsibility, independence,

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26424/philobib.2022.27.2.12>.

control. The question of learner autonomy is therefore imperative to language teachers who need to guide their students on the path to autodidacticism.

Following a theoretical framework on the relation between motivation and autonomy in traditional and online classes of EMP, this paper presents the students' perception and attitude towards self-regulated learning in both settings. As the primary objective was to enhance students' autonomy, I developed the working hypotheses: medical students, who are highly motivated to learn EMP, are also likely to be greatly autonomous; in addition, online classes are expected to promote an even higher level of autonomy. The main questions to be answered in this research paper were: Are motivated students also willing to become autonomous learners? To what degree do they possess the capability required to take accountability for their own learning? Is complete autonomy achievable in an institutional setting? Is there a marked distinction between motivation and autonomy levels in traditional settings vs. online learning? To test the hypotheses and answer these questions, I developed a questionnaire, and applied it to first- and second-year students majoring in General Medicine at the *Transilvania* University of Brasov, Faculty of Medicine, in the academic year 2020-2021. The answers collected provided useful information for the present study.

2. Theoretical background

a. Motivation and Autonomy

In most analyses of the language acquisition process, motivation will stand out as one of the preeminent factors. To a substantially greater extent than in primary and secondary school, motivation becomes a salient component during higher education¹, which would translate into higher scores on autonomy in the model of self-determination.² In fact, motivation is so tightly woven into the development of autonomy, that it is scarcely possible to imagine self-regulated learning without it. The paramount postulate of the connection motivation-autonomy was formulated by Deci and Ryan³: the motivation to undertake or perform a given action increases proportionally with the sense of control over the process. Similarly, Noels⁴ reasons that autonomy generates motivation: the more freedom students have to choose methods and approaches to their own learning process, the more motivated they will be to complete it.

¹ Kennon M. Sheldon, "Positive value change during college: Normative trends and individual differences," *Journal of Research in Personality*, 39 (April 2004): 210–211.

² Edward L. Deci, and Richard M. Ryan, *Handbook of self-determination research* (Rochester: The University of Rochester Press, 1985, 2002), 7-8.

³ Deci and Ryan, *Handbook of self-determination research*, 12.

⁴ Kimberly A. Noels, "Learning Spanish as a Second Language: Learners' Orientations and Perceptions of Their Teachers' Communication Style," *Language Learning* 51, no.1 (March 2001): 118-120, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0023-8333.00149>.

I would bring to the fore a more nuanced aspect of motivation: I consider that, rather than contrarywise, it is the intrinsic motivation that lies at the heart of autonomy. The individuals have the freedom to choose, and, by virtue of the exercised freedom, they also make choices on their own volition. This willingness represents mere motivation. Borg and Al-Busaidi⁵ doubt that learners could gain autonomy “unless they are willing to take responsibility for their learning”; Lamb⁶ and Sinclair⁷ claim that autonomy requires students to find the inherent motivation for learning. Likewise, Dam⁸ also emphasises that autonomous learning is only achievable through the willingness to take responsibility for one’s own learning. But with regard to the tandem autonomy-motivation, the precedence of one over the other may remain a conundrum: are motivated students more prone to autonomy or are the autonomous students more likely to grow motivated? It is a fine demarcation line, and this loop question might remain so.

In a previous study⁹ on the role of motivation in learning EMP, I showed that medical students I worked with were highly motivated. In traditional classes of EMP, high scores on motivation corresponded to higher scores on learning strategies, which are consistent with higher autonomy. In fact, the definitions of autonomous learning and learning strategies overlap at times. From both perspectives, learning is regarded as an active, cerebral, learner-conceived process. And while the purpose of using learning strategies is to facilitate the selection, acquisition, organisation, or integration of new knowledge,¹⁰ the same description can apply to learner autonomy, since such strategies are an inherent prerequisite of autonomous learning. Similarly, the definitions provided by Oxford¹¹ assert that self-regulated learning relies on the use of learning strategies that allow the planning, conducting, and evaluating one’s own performance in order to enhance second language proficiency. This view

⁵ Simon Borg and Saleh Al-Busaidi, “Learner autonomy: English language teachers’ beliefs and practices,” *ELT Research Paper 12-07* (London: British Council, 2012): 4, https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/b459%20ELTRP%20Report%20Busaidi_final.pdf (accessed on 4 September 2022).

⁶ Terry Lamb, “Learner autonomy and teacher autonomy: Synthesising an agenda,” in *Learner and teacher autonomy: Concepts, realities and responses*, eds. Terry Lamb and Hayo Reinders, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2008), 269-284.

⁷ Barbara Sinclair, “Learner autonomy: the next phase?” in *Learner Autonomy, Teacher Autonomy: Future Directions*, eds. Barbara Sinclair, Ian McGrath and Terry Lamb (Harlow: Addison WesleyLongman, 2000), 4-14.

⁸ Leni Dam, *Learner Autonomy: From theory to classroom practice (vol. 3)* (Dublin: Authentik Language Learning Resources, 1995).

⁹ Ecaterina Pavel, “Language learner motivation and strategies in English for medical purposes,” *Philobiblon: Transylvanian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Humanities*, 25, no. 1 (2020): 125-138.

¹⁰ Claire Weinstein and Richard Mayer, “The Teaching of Learning Strategies,” in *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, ed. Merlin Wittrock (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 315-327.

¹¹ Rebecca L. Oxford, *Teaching and researching language learning strategies: Self-regulation in context*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017).

punctiliously conforms to Little's definition of learner autonomy as the "active involvement in the planning, monitoring and evaluation"¹² of one's own learning process.

b. Autonomy and Learning EMP

In its most general interpretation, the term autonomy has fairly uncontroversial and congruent connotations: it refers to the active interaction with the world – an endeavour which begins with the general sense of being able to accomplish independently what one undertakes, without being destabilised by unexpected variables. As I mentioned earlier, the definitions of autonomous learning largely converge to three fundamental facets: independence, responsibility, control.

To begin with, in Littlewood's view, an autonomous person is the one with "an independent capacity to make and carry out the choices which govern his or her actions."¹³ A similar emphasis on independence is put by Joshi¹⁴ in defining autonomous learning as the capacity to make and carry out choices which regulate the individual's independent actions. Thus, encouraging learner autonomy will determine students to take on more responsibilities and to be more actively involved in the educational process. The connection between independence and responsibility is also underlined by Hedge,¹⁵ who reasons that planning and assessing one's development independently means taking responsibility for one's own learning. The primary definition, still considered pivotal in describing learner autonomy, is "the ability to take charge of, or responsibility for, one's own learning."¹⁶ Finally, the concept of control with reference to the learning process is found in the concept of *locus of control*, central in Deci and Ryan's theory on self-determination. Being autonomous implies that the individual chooses freely to act or not by reason of self-supported motivations. According to Benson,¹⁷ autonomous learning relies on the individual's control over the educational process, both inside and outside the classroom. Chan¹⁸ states that having more control over the learning process increases "overall motivation in the development of learner autonomy"; in her view, autonomous learning involves the students' control in each phase, starting with setting the goals to assessment of their own progress.

¹² David Little, "Learner autonomy, inner speech and the European Language portfolio," in *Advances in Research on Language Acquisition and teaching: Selected Papers* (Tessaloniki: G.A.L.A., 2010), 27.

¹³ William Littlewood, "Autonomy: an anatomy and a framework," *Pergamon*, 24, no. 4 (1996): 428.

¹⁴ Khem Raj Joshi, "Learner perceptions and teacher beliefs about learner autonomy in language learning," *Journal of NELTA*, 16 (2011): 14.

¹⁵ Tricia Hedge, *Teaching and learning in the language classroom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁶ Phil Benson, *Teaching and researching: Autonomy* (London: Longman, 2011), 58.

¹⁷ Phil Benson, "Autonomy in Language Teaching and Learning," *Language Teaching*, 40, no. 01 (January 2007): 21-40.

¹⁸ Victoria Chan, "Readiness for learner autonomy: What do our learners tell us?" *Teaching in Higher Education*, 6(4) (2001): 505-518.

The matter of control is at the core of autonomy and can be analysed from a twofold perspective: the object and degree. How much control can a student assume, and over which elements of the language acquisition process taking place in a given setting?

Firstly, with reference to the object of control, Benson¹⁹ identifies three elements: learning management (planning, organising, evaluating), learning contents, and the cognitive processes implemented (psychology of learning: attention, awareness, reflection, metacognitive knowledge). The source of control can be external to the learner, when someone else determines what needs to be done, or internal, when choices are made by the learner. From this point of view, Littlewood distinguishes between proactive and reactive autonomy. Proactive autonomy is exhaustive: from formulating learning goals, selecting learning methods and techniques, to evaluating outcomes, it “regulates the direction of activity as well as the activity itself”. Reactive autonomy, on the other hand, adjusts the action to a set course; it “does not create its own directions but, once a direction has been initiated, enables learners to organise their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal.”²⁰ Following this distinction, Benson²¹ describes reactive autonomy as the control exercised over learning management and cognitive processes, but not over the learning content, whereas proactive autonomy stands for having control over all three aspects of learning. However, from my standpoint based on empirical observations, students may be more proactively autonomous in aspects related to the cognitive processes and more reactive in learning management (or vice versa) and this distinction differs from student to student, or it can fluctuate for the same student according to various factors. These observations are based on my professional experience as an EMP teacher over the last 11 years.

Secondly, as to “how much” control learners can have over various aspects of learning, the answer depends on numerous variables: to what extent are they aware of their own autonomy? How much autonomy are they actually ready to undertake? How much effort are they willing to put into achieving the desired level of autonomy? How much freedom is the teacher prepared to foster? How much individual autonomy will be employed in the given context (traditional vs. online)? The answers to these questions may vary from culture to culture, from school to school, from class to class, from individual to individual. Hence, the limited applicability of using measuring instruments like questionnaires on a small-scale group over a short period. Considering the instability of the factors underlying quantitative analyses of autonomy, Cotterall proposed a more adequate concept: readiness for autonomy, allowing the identification of possible “profiles” of learner beliefs. The goal would be “not to assign learners to rigid categories, but rather to further our understanding of the framework within which language learners operate.”²²

¹⁹ Phil Benson, *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning* (Harlow: Longman. 2001), 47.

²⁰ William Littlewood, “Defining and developing autonomy in East Asian contexts,” *Applied Linguistics*, 20(1) (1999): 75.

²¹ Benson, *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*, 100.

²² Sara Cotterall, “Key variables in language learning: What do learners believe about them?” *System*, 27 (1999): 510.

c. Autonomy in Traditional vs. Online Classes

A large literature on motivation and autonomy has emerged and decisively epitomised “a movement away from a predominantly teaching-oriented perspective to one that emphasizes the learner’s active role in the learning process.”²³ Benson and Voller²⁴ describe five different roles of autonomy in language learning, among which teaching the learners to take responsibility for their own learning outcomes and for their learning process and acquisition. Littlewood²⁵ views autonomous learning as fundamental for assuming various duties that have naturally been regarded as inherent to the teacher’s responsibility, related to learning management and the cognitive processes. Joshi²⁶ underlines “the complete responsibility for one’s learning carried out without the investment of a teacher or pedagogic materials.” Nevertheless, learner autonomy “is not self-instruction/learning without a teacher” and pedagogical guidance is still requisite in the process.²⁷ Thus, self-regulated learning does not equate self-instruction, meaning that engagement of the teacher does not negatively impact autonomy. In fact, it would be difficult to envisage teacherless education in an institutional setting, albeit online, so the question of autonomy refers rather to “the degree to which individuals are active participants in their own learning.”²⁸ The “complete responsibility” mentioned by Joshi does not imply the student’s complete accountability for the management of the entire learning process, leaving out any involvement of a teacher.

Firstly, exercising control over the choice of resources, objectives, or structure of a course, be it traditional or online, requires the student to have a clear idea of these contents, which seems somewhat unlikely. While the student may have a high general English language proficiency, specialised English is a subset of English as a foreign language, with significant differences in lexical, syntactical, and even cultural representations. Moreover, 1st- and 2nd-year medical students have only partially acquired specialised terminology in their native language and will be first exposed to various notions in English.

Secondly, depending on the cultural background, teachers might be reluctant to grant too much independence to students, thus remaining authoritarian figures. Teachers’ perception of learner autonomy is essential, as it affects their teaching methods and, subsequently, the degree of students’ autonomy. Generally, “from the teachers’ perspective, autonomy is primarily concerned with institutional and classroom learning assignments within

²³ Derin Atay, and Ceniz Ozbulgan, “Memory strategy instruction, contextual learning and ESP vocabulary recall,” *English for Specific Purposes* 26, no.1 (2007): 39–40, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2006.01.002>.

²⁴ Phil Benson and Peter Voller, *Autonomy and independence in language learning* (London: Longman, 1997).

²⁵ Littlewood, *Defining and developing autonomy*.

²⁶ Joshi, *Learner perceptions*, 13.

²⁷ Edith Esch, “Promoting Learner Autonomy: Criteria for the Selection of Appropriate Methods,” in *Taking Control: Autonomy in Language Learning*, eds. Richard Pemberton, Edward S.L. Li, Winnie W. F. Or, & Herbert D. Pierson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1998), 37.

²⁸ Dörnyei, Z. *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005), 191.

established curricula.”²⁹ But autonomy diminishes students’ dependence on teachers and determines them to take initiative to diagnose learning needs, to set and fulfil objectives, and evaluate their own progress. Working with autonomous learners might be a source of anxiety for teachers who will find themselves in the position of relinquishing control over the classroom and improving communication with their students.³⁰ Moreover, to allow themselves to embrace and encourage learner autonomy in their own classrooms, “teachers themselves must display a degree of autonomy in their approaches to teaching and learning,”³¹ meaning that learner autonomy will most likely be directly proportional to teacher autonomy. In this respect, teacher education programmes should value and focus more on enhancing autonomy in teachers’ training.

As regards online learning, its perceived image oscillates between two limits: on the one hand it is seen as an ineffective mass training method; and on the other hand, it is viewed as a modern method based on the individual work of a student placed in front of a screen, which does not necessarily equate to autonomy. Ideally, in the absence of physical encounters with the teacher, online learning platforms should provide the opportunity for cognitive and metacognitive engagement. During the COVID-19 pandemic, online courses held at *Transilvania* University focused (or at least attempted to focus) on encouraging students to cultivate autonomy, creating contexts for students to question the relevance, methods, and processes of learning, as well as their own motivation to acquire new knowledge. All these are elements of learning management, and distance learning courses are meant to promote the planning of activities and resources. Ideally. But autonomous learning involves managing attention resources in the first place, and the drawback of online spaces is that they favour instant dissipation of attention. In autonomous students, the control of attention is harder to stabilise; and attention is a key element in triggering, maintaining, and directing cognitive activity. But are all students aware of such autonomy, are they willing to make use or able to employ it? Hard to believe that a unanimous and uniform positive response can be given. First of all, because Romania preserves an authoritarian educational environment,³² in which teachers tend to largely control most aspects of students’ learning itinerary, thus limiting their real autonomy. This limitation, in turn, minimises self-confidence and sometimes motivation as well. Secondly, the sudden shift to online teaching surprised, first and foremost, the teachers, most of them unprepared to face these abrupt challenges. In a first phase, both students and

²⁹ Phil Benson, “Teachers’ and learners’ perspectives on autonomy,” in *Learner and teacher autonomy: Concepts, realities and responses*, eds. Terry Lamb and Hayo Reinders (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2008), 15.

³⁰ William La Ganza, “Learner autonomy - teacher autonomy: Interrelating and the will to empower,” in *Learner and teacher autonomy: Concepts, realities and responses*, eds. Terry Lamb and Hayo Reinders (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2008), 63-79.

³¹ Benson, *Teaching and researching: Autonomy*, 185.

³² Dobrot Loredana, Roșu Monica, *Teachers’ leadership style in the classroom and their impact upon high school students*, https://www.afahc.ro/ro/afases/2012/socio/2.2/drobot_rosu_leadership%20styles.pdf (accessed on 4 September 2022).

teachers found themselves in the intimidating situation of making use of tools that were unfamiliar or unavailable. And motivation only increases to the extent that learners estimate they can control the process they have to go through. Another drawback of online learning resides in the massification and technological anonymity which risk transforming the university platform into some aphonic window on a device, among many time-consuming, more exciting, and appealing platforms and applications.

Though online education would generate the appropriate context for promoting and enhancing self-directed learning, various difficulties can occur. In Romania, teachers were not prepared, trained, or even equipped to manage such challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. As for the *Transilvania* University eLearning Platform (powered by Moodle™), it contains the tools for creating various activities, but they are less intuitive and user-friendly than other popular platforms, such as Google Classroom, especially when a faculty member works with more than 400 students during an academic year. Therefore, creating specific learning activities was strictly a matter of determination, patience, intuition, tenacity, self-teaching work, or trial and error experiments – briefly, also a matter of motivation and autonomy. As for the classes of EMP, each group of students had various activities – drag & drop, fill in, multiple choice exercises, essays, etc., for which each student received written feedback. It all added up to Sisyphean work, with little control over the short- and long-term efficacy of my endeavours, and without a proper connection and immediate feedback from my students. Besides, for online seminars and courses, the platform did not allow for the students' cameras to be turned on, as it had not been designed to support so many users simultaneously, and it would crash. Which meant that students were outside of the range of control of any teacher. However, for the EMP classes they were asked to have the microphones turned on and to answer verbally when they were asked. Sometimes in the background different sounds or noises could be heard (TV, music, or people – some students were in the residence hall, others with siblings who were probably taking classes too). So, however motivated, students could not always be autonomous in every respect, especially in terms of space. But the overwhelming majority took their individual or group tasks very seriously – they had to solve exercises and take periodic tests from the specialised terminology, to read articles and produce content based on them, to listen or watch audio or video materials, to work individually and in teams to produce and present various contents (e.g., a simulation of the doctor-patient interaction in the history taking process) and results were above average to excellent. In addition to the limitations related to personal space, there were also areas of technical discomfort – the platform had errors, it crashed during tests or online classes, the students did not know in the beginning how to use it (e.g., the feedback written by me was visible to them only when setting the language of the platform in English, not in Romanian), etc. There was also psychological pressure – some felt isolated, depressed, unable to manage their time while binging on streaming entertainment or social media. Others, on the contrary, felt that they could manage their time more efficiently, not having to move from one building of the university to another and to waste time between two classes. Unlike traditional education, where things occurred without great surprises, online learning

meant isolation in the unknown, hence motivation and autonomy were key. And the survey applied to students tried to fathom this difference in perception.

3. Methodology

The study was conducted with two monolingual groups of respondents who volunteered to participate anonymously. The respondents (n=88) were first- and second-year undergraduates (aged between 19 and 23), majoring in General Medicine at the Faculty of Medicine, *Transilvania* University of Braşov. According to their English proficiency level, they were upper-intermediate students (B2-C1), enrolled in the EMP courses which run for 4 semesters of 14 weeks each, comprising a theoretical course and a seminar every two weeks. The distribution of the participants in the study was 55 first-year students (62,5 %) and 22 second-year students (37,5 %). To better understand the studied aspects, I elaborated a questionnaire and applied it to collect quantitative data. The survey was conducted during the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021 (May 2021). The questionnaire consisted of 50 items (not including the “personal information” section) and used a five-stage Likert scale to assess the students’ perception of online vs. traditional learning, their levels of motivation and autonomy in the mentioned settings.

Results are presented through descriptive statistics and followed by an interpretation of the data, by comparing and contrasting the students’ levels of autonomy in the aforementioned contexts.

4. Results and Discussion

Besides the personal information section (age and year of studies), the questionnaire consisted of three main sections containing 50 closed-ended questions:

1. Decision autonomy (5 items), section which focused on the students’ desirability to be involved in the decision-making process regarding the structure of the EMP classes;
2. Autonomy as responsibility and independence, with two subsections: student responsibility (20 items) and teacher responsibility (9 items);
3. Control over the learning process in traditional vs. online classes (16 items).

The tables show the mean values for each question, on a scale from 1 to 5 [1 Strongly disagree (SD), 2 Disagree (D), 3 Neither agree nor disagree (NAND), 4 Agree (A), 5 Strongly agree (SA)]. The mean values show the answers provided by the undergraduates per year of study.

a. Autonomy as a Decision Process

The first section of the questionnaire reflects the student’s attitude towards deciding upon course design, learning, and teaching process, as well as evaluation methods.

	I consider that I should be allowed to decide upon...	1 st year	2 nd year
1.	Class objectives	3.2	3.5
2.	Materials used	3.0	3.1
3.	Activities and tasks	3.5	3.6
4.	Topics	3.9	4.1
5.	Evaluation methods	3.5	3.1

Table 1. Autonomy – Decision Process

Since any learning process involves a certain degree of proactiveness, it is important to determine, first of all, the extent to which a student wants to take control of the act of learning itself. This impetus to take the initiative represents the motivation that leads to cognitive and metacognitive engagement.

Overall, both first- and second-year students showed a fairly positive approach to the decision-making process shaping the EMP classes. The item with the highest rate of agreement was item 4 (*Topics*): first-year students scored a mean of 3.9 (42% A and 29% SA), whereas the second-year students scored a mean of 4.1 (45% SA and 33% A).

Item 3 (*Activities and tasks*) also recorded scores slightly above average: 3.5 (1st year) / 3.6 (2nd year). This means that the majority of students wanted to choose their activities, subjects, and learning/teaching methods; namely, the *what* and *how* of learning. Which, in fact, correlates to the propositions and suggestions I receive from them at the beginning of each academic year. Many of these suggestions have been adopted and adapted to my seminar activities – debates, academic writing, contests, general knowledge games, quizzes, discussions based on various materials, etc.

Slightly lower scores (but still above average) were recorded for item 1 (*Class objectives*): 3.2 / 3.5 and item 5 (*Evaluation methods*): 3.5 / 3.1.

In terms of *Class objectives*, this item might have gotten slightly higher scores if students had participated in this survey at the beginning of the first year, considering the answers I receive then, when all students are asked to write down their objectives and expectations. Expectations and goals are harder to calibrate when you understand a phenomenon or field from its margins, without being able to accurately assess yourself in relation to an ultimate goal. In addition, even after a year or two of study, the goals could be rather personal (e.g., “to be able to overcome my fear of speaking in public”), and less related to the classes themselves, to how much specialised language (and from what specialisations) should be studied or acquired.

Concerning the evaluation methods, students have the choice between two types of assessment, which are presented to them at the beginning of each semester. If they had not had that freedom, the scores would have probably been higher in this category.

The lowest score was recorded for item 2 (*Materials used*): 3.0 / 3.1. However, students do have ideas and suggestions about materials and resources, especially audio or video ones. But not in terms of grammar resources, for example, because they are less interested in the formal aspects of the language. Nevertheless, they initiate discussions about engaging resources they find on the Internet, such as funny videos about grammar and grammar mistakes, poems or songs concerning the English language or EMP, etc.

b. Responsibility and Independence

	I consider it is the teacher's responsibility...	1st year	2nd year
6.	To set objectives and design the curriculum	4.1	3.8
7.	To choose the teaching methods, activities, tasks	3.8	3.7
8.	To tell me what to do	3.6	3.7
9.	To offer grammar/lexical explanations and guidance	3.8	4.0
10.	To explain the meaning of unknown words and concepts	3.3	3.4
11.	To provide notions and cultural knowledge that I would not find in dictionaries	4.2	4.3
12.	For my progress	1.9	2.1
13.	To assess my progress and give me feedback	3.8	3.8
14.	To correct and explain my errors	3.9	4.0

Table 2. Teacher Responsibility

Although the scores presented in Table 1 reveal that most students were open and positive towards the idea of deciding upon their learning process and EMP classes, the teacher's responsibility prevails, in their view. According to the scores presented in Table 2, the teacher plays the fundamental role in delivering information which extends beyond the field of medicine or of the specialised language – visual arts, history, music, psychology, etc. The activities related to such fields are the most popular among students, considering their feedback at the end of each academic year.

Setting the course objectives does not appear as an aspect that they would take control of, and the score for item 6 (4.1 / 3.8) indicates the teacher's prominent role in this aspect. Above average scores are also shown for item 7 (*Methods, activities, tasks*: 3.8 / 3.7) and 9 (*Grammar/lexical explanations and guidance*: 3.8 / 4.0), again showing the high responsibility of the teacher in this regard. The high scores on item 9 indicate that although students clearly display the desire to assume control, they still feel the necessity for direct guidance, explanations, and clarifications – perhaps as a way to save time, or out of haste, convenience, lack of sufficient time or interest, or due to the inability to find the right resources to look for the information themselves. Hence the higher score for item 8 (*It is the*

teacher's responsibility to tell me what to do): most of the first-year students responded with A (38%) and SA (22%), a proportion that is also preserved in the second-year students: the majority (33%) answered A, and 30% SA. These responses may be surprising: second-year students would have been expected to have become more independent, especially after two semesters of online classes. But the scores recorded for item 10 (*To explain the meaning of unknown words and concepts*: 3.3 / 3.4) are not as high. However, these scores are explainable if we consider that it is easier to search for the meaning of a word than to find the answer to grammatical, lexical, etymological, or even metalinguistic subtleties.

Consistent with these scores are also those obtained for items 13 (*To assess my progress and give me feedback*) and 14 (*To correct and explain my errors*), which refer to the teacher's role in the supervision, correction, and guidance of students through the difficulties and mistakes of a discipline. The only low score, significantly below the mean, is recorded on item 7 (*The teacher's responsibility for my progress*: 1.9 / 2.1), which indicates that students understand that the responsibility to progress and acquire knowledge lies with them to a considerable extent.

	To what extent do you agree with the following statements?	1 st year	2 nd year
15.	I set monthly / semestrial goals to improve my English	3.6	3.4
16.	I organise my time according to these goals	3.7	3.5
17.	I know how I can overcome my weaknesses	3.6	3.7
18.	When I don't understand something in class, I ask the teacher to explain	3.2	3.3
19.	When I don't understand something, I prefer to find answers / solutions on my own	4.2	4.4
20.	When I don't understand something, I will not go on without looking for clarifications	3.4	3.1
21.	I monitor my errors and try to avoid repeating them	3.9	3.8
22.	I take notes when I am in class	4.0	3.8
23.	I try to deduce the meaning of unknown words	4.2	4.3
24.	I check the definitions of unknown words in dictionaries	3.6	3.6
25.	I try to use the newly-learnt words to fix them in my memory	3.3	3.0
26.	I check pronunciations online	4.4	4.2
27.	I try to imitate native speakers when I speak	3.7	3.6
28.	I sometimes read loudly to listen to my own pronunciation	4.0	3.8
29.	I read extra materials in English	4.0	3.8
30.	I listen to extra materials in English	4.0	4.2
31.	I watch films in English, without subtitles / with English subtitles	4.3	4.3

32.	If I have to speak (in English) in public, I prepare my speech in advance	4.0	4.1
33.	I always proofread my texts	4.1	4.0
34.	I like teamwork during the English classes	3.3	3.0

Table 3. Students' responsibility and independence

Students demonstrated a high degree of independence and responsibility for the act of learning, half of the items having a high agreement rate (over 4). For example, in items 18, 19, 20 referring to the same possible situation (*When I don't understand something*), the independent approach (item 19: *I prefer to find answers / solutions on my own*) had the highest scores (4.2 / 4.4) – 1 point over the teacher-dependent approach (*I ask the teacher to explain*: 3.2 / 3.3). However, not all students felt the need to understand everything: one possibility was to move on without seeking clarification (item 20: 3.4 / 3.1). However, for this item, the majority of first-year students answered SA (58%), 27% A, 13% NAND, only 2% (one person) A and none - SA. In the second year, the proportions are somewhat preserved: the majority (45%) voted SA, 30% A, 12% NAND, 9% D and 3% (one person) SA. The reasons for moving forward without understanding can vary, from the lack of interest in the actual subject to time constraints. Furthermore, after a long period of online learning, students started to enter a passive phase, to prioritise their resources differently, etc.

The highest scores were obtained for item 23 (*I try to deduce the meaning of unknown words*: 4.2 / 4.3), item 26 (*I check pronunciations online*: 4.4 / 4.2) and item 31 (*I watch films in English, without subtitles / with English subtitles*: 4.3 / 4.3). In fact, watching films and TV series was a popular activity during the pandemic and, if the statement had also included subtitles in Romanian, the score would certainly have been close to 5.

Other individual activities related to learning strategies had high agreement rates: item 22 (4.0 in first-year students and slightly lower in second year: 3.8), and identical scores for items 28 (*I sometimes read loudly to listen to my own pronunciation*) and 29 (*I read extra materials in English*). First-year students scored the same mean, 4.0, in item 30 (*I listen to extra materials in English*), while second-year students scored a positive difference of 0.2 points. Items 32 (*If I have to speak English in public, I prepare my speech in advance*) and 33 (*I always proofread my texts*) also had scores above average: 4.0 / 4.1 and 4.1 / 4.0, respectively.

Somewhat lower values were recorded in the categories related to time management - items 15 (*I set monthly / semestrial goals to improve my English*: 3.6 / 3.4) and 16 (*I organise my time according to these goals*: 3.7 / 3.5), but also to the management of one's own errors or weaknesses: items 17 (*I know how I can overcome my weaknesses*: 3.6 / 3.7), 21 (*I monitor my errors and try to avoid repeating them*: 3.9 / 3.8) and 27 (*I try to imitate native speakers*: 3.7 / 3.6). The explanation lies in the fact that students may lack either the necessary tools to identify and correct themselves (they are not aware of their own flaws and errors), or the readiness to work on fixing them, considering them less important in relation to other subjects or disciplines.

The use of dictionaries does not seem to be popular either, compared to other methods of acquiring / memorising notions: item 24 has a mean of 3.6 for both years of study.

And memorising the new notions is even less popular – item 25 has a lower agreement rate (*I try to use the newly-learnt words to fix them in my memory*: 3.3 / 3.0), as it requires a greater effort: searching for contexts in which the newly-learnt words appear, generating content with these terms, and verifying that they were correctly used.

Equally unpopular is teamwork, registering the same scores for item 34 (*I like teamwork during the English classes*): 3.3 / 3.0.

c. Traditional (T) vs. Online (O) Classes

Questions	1 st year		2 nd year	
	T	O	T	O
35. It's easier for me to plan my time effectively	3.3	3.1	3.1	3.4
36. It helps me to create a studying routine and, therefore, self-discipline	3.5	2.7	3.5	3.1
37. Direct interaction with the teacher is more effective in the learning process	4.0	2.0	4.1	2.4
38. I feel more involved in the learning process	3.5	2.7	3.9	2.6
39. This type of classes helps me to manage more effectively my weaknesses	3.3	2.5	3.5	2.5
40. I tend to be more passive and rely more on the teacher	2.5	2.9	3.1	3.1
41. I understand better the explanations given during classes	3.6	3.0	3.8	2.6
42. I understand and retain better the teacher's feedback regarding my errors	3.5	3.4	3.9	2.9
43. I think that the teacher observes and monitors better my progress	3.5	3.4	3.8	3.0
44. I feel that the grades taken in this learning system are more accurate	3.4	2.8	3.5	2.6
45. I prefer this kind of interaction (face-to-face / online) with my colleagues	3.9	2.4	4.0	2.5
46. The activities were interesting and engaging	4.7	3.9	4.5	4.1
13. I find it boring/tiring to sit in the classroom / in front of the computer for 2 hours	2.2	2.1	1.8	2.4
48. My interest in the English classes is affected by the timetable, setting / university platform	2.8	2.2	2.9	2.5
49. I consider that medical English can be learnt only through face-to-face / online interaction	2.3	2.8	2.9	2.6
50. Overall, I think traditional/online classes are more effective for me	3.4	2.7	3.6	2.6

Table 4. Traditional vs. Online Classes

At first glance, the obvious observation would be that only in three situations did online learning register a higher (thus favourable) score than traditional education: in item 35 (*It's easier for me to plan my time effectively*), the second-year students registered a difference of 0.3 points between traditional and online learning (3.1 vs. 3.4). And for item 49 (*I consider that medical English can be learnt only through face-to-face / online interaction*), first-year students believed that learning exclusively online can be more effective than learning at school, although both scores are below average: 2.3 vs. 2.8 (a difference of 0.5 points). Also, the learning process seemed to be affected by the timetable rather than by the prolonged use of the online platform: although below average, the scores are higher by 0.6 (first-year students) and 0.4 (second-year students) to the detriment of traditional teaching environment. These figures coincide with the students' feedback from the end of each academic year, in which the most frequently mentioned downside of the EMP classes was that they start too early (8 a.m.).

The biggest differences related to the students' perception of EMP online vs. traditional classes stands out for 7 items. In item 37 (*Direct interaction with the teacher is more effective in the learning process*) there is a difference of 2 points in the first year and 1.7 points in the second year, in favour of traditional learning. Students felt considerably less active and involved in the online learning process – item 38 (with a difference of 1.2 points in the first year and 1.3 points in the second year), while managing one's own weaknesses also appeared to be easier in the traditional setting, with a variance of 0.8 points in first-year students and 1 point in second-year students. Regarding the understanding of the explanations (item 41) there was a significant difference to the detriment of online learning, of 0.6 points in the first year and 1.2 points in the second year. Another great difference in favour of the traditional classes concerns the feedback provided by the teacher on errors and mistakes (item 42), but only in the second year (a difference of 1 point), while the students in the first year seemed unaffected by the transition from the physical to the virtual environment. On the other hand, the first-year students were much more attentive to the feedback I provided on the platform, they read it and had comments and questions related to it, while the second-year students were not as responsive, even if they read the feedback related to their mistakes (not all of them did, only 78.79% of them). But both groups of students believed that grades (item 44) were more relevant in the traditional environment (with a difference of 0.6 points – first year, respectively 0.9 points – second year). This difference is only reflected in item 43 (*I think that the teacher observes and monitors better my progress*) in the scores of the second-year students (with a difference of 0.8 points in favour of face-to-face learning), while in the first-year students the difference is only 0.1 points. Compared to classroom activities (item 46), first-year students found online activities less attractive, with a difference of 1.2 points, while the difference in second year was only 0.4 points.

In contrast, neither the physical nor the online classes seemed to bore or tire the students significantly, although the first-year students were less positive towards online learning (with a difference of 0.6 points). Neither environment (online or traditional) seemed to make students much more susceptible to dependence on the teacher during classes (no score difference in the second year: 3.1 vs. 3.1, and only a difference of 0.4 points in the first

year suggesting that online classes could be slightly more conducive to passivity). On the other hand, in terms of self-discipline (item 36), it was found that the online setting is less favourable: first-year students rated online learning as more difficult to manage in terms of discipline and effective scheduling (with a difference of 0.8 points), while this difference is slightly smaller for second-year students (0.4 points).

It should be noted that the item with a noteworthy difference in both groups of students refers to socialisation (Item 46: *I prefer this kind of interaction with my colleagues – both groups expressed in favour of physical classes, with a difference of 1.5 points each to the detriment of online setting*). Thus, although they did not favoured teamwork, students still preferred to see their colleagues face to face and not (just) online.

Overall (item 50), both first-year students (with a difference of 0.7 points) and second-year students (with a difference of 1 points) considered face-to-face classes as more effective than online ones. With values below average for 9 items (between 2.0 and 2.9 in the first year, and between 2.4 and 2.9 in the second year), online education is visibly disfavoured compared to the traditional one.

I return to the aforementioned conundrum: is autonomy sustainable without motivation and vice versa? One could be motivated to learn a language without having the motivation to do so in an autonomous manner, and this study tried to examine the motivation and autonomy of medical students in the two contexts: traditional and online. I thus considered some components of the autonomous learning process: desire, independence, responsibility, and control – dissociable aspects, after all, since their automatic ensuing from each other is not guaranteed.

As shown in several previous studies also conducted at the Faculty of Medicine, *Transilvania* University, medical students are highly motivated; moreover, they are able to acknowledge their learning needs³³ and identify their own strengths and weaknesses,³⁴ are capable of learning independently and of using learning strategies and techniques,³⁵ which translates into a greater degree of autonomy.

With regard to their readiness for autonomy, medical students in both first and second year have a slightly above-average desire to take the initiative on the educational process: 3.42 out of 5 points (first-year students) and 3.48 out of 5 points (second-year students) but have a higher degree of independence and responsibility: 3.82 out of 5 points (first year), 3.75 out of 5 points (second year). Most students prefer to be involved in the decision-making process regarding topics, activities, tasks, assessment process, and a little less in terms of course objectives or materials. Which actually happens: at the beginning of each academic year, they make such proposals, which

³³ Ecaterina Pavel, “English for medical purposes: Specific needs and challenges,” in *Exploring Language Variation, Diversity and Change*, eds. Marinela Burada, Oana Tatu, Raluca Sinu, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), 139-164.

³⁴ Ecaterina Pavel, “English for Medical Purposes: From Errors to Alternative Pedagogical Solutions,” in *ICERI2019 Proceedings*, (Seville: IATED Academy, 2019), 6029-6035.

³⁵ Pavel, *Language learner motivation and strategies*.

is why the structure of the courses has undergone various changes over the years, meant to meet students' needs, interests, and preferences.

Although students show above-average desire and ability to be autonomous learners, in their perception the teacher's role is equally important in the learning process, judging by the resulting mean scale scores. They demonstrate substantial capabilities to use autonomous learning strategies but consider that certain aspects of class management depend more on the teacher. However, in their overwhelming majority, students believe that they (and not the teacher) are directly responsible for their own progress. Autonomous language learning implies finding solutions to various problems independently, it requires individual and collaborative activities, as well as developing self-assessment tools. Paradoxically, medical students are not teamwork enthusiasts, yet researchers such as Dang³⁶ and Illes³⁷ claim that group work activities promote autonomy in learning.

The profile of the autonomous student may change depending on the environment in which the act of learning occurs: students had a positive attitude towards the traditional setting, with a score above average (3.4 first-year students, 3.6 second-year students), whereas for online learning scores were below average (2.8 both groups). The categories in which students felt disadvantaged by online learning (and, implicitly, demotivated) are multiple: interaction with the teacher, the degree of their own involvement, time management, lower understanding of explanations, dependence on the teacher and increasing passivity in the virtual environment, poorer assimilation of the feedback given by the teacher, decreased accuracy of grades, and low quality of interaction with colleagues. In general, despite the implicit flexibility, the feeling of control and self-control is lower in the online environment than in the traditional setting, which can be demotivating with a domino effect: the decrease in the feeling of control leads to a decrease in motivation, which, in turn, leads to a lower commitment to the learning process, thus in taking responsibility. In other words, it may lead to a decrease in autonomy. This reasoning is also confirmed by the empirical observation regarding the evolution of students' involvement and interest according to the learning environment (higher in the physical classes and lower in virtual settings). The differences in perception are slightly different in the two groups: on the one hand, first-year students seemed less affected while adapting to the online environment since they only got to experience one semester online. On the other hand, second-year students had already gone through two semesters online, having also experienced the lockdown period, which was particularly challenging, and which led to an increase in passivity and lack of attention in most students (according to my practical observations in the classroom).

The results described contrast with the theories formulated by some researchers, such as Holec,³⁸ who claim that a formal learning environment is less conducive to the cultivation of

³⁶ Tin T. Dang, "Learner autonomy: A synthesis of theory and practice," *The Internet Journal of Language, Culture and Society*, 35 (2012): 52-67.

³⁷ Eva Illes, "Learner autonomy revisited," *ELT Journal*, 66(4) (2012): 505-513.

³⁸ Henri Holec, *Autonomy in foreign language learning* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1981).

autonomy. Online learning is less formal and rigid than in traditional settings, and yet, overall, students did not feel it more effective and motivating than face-to-face learning.

However, promoting autonomy in virtual classes is equally important, and the challenge lies in finding ways to engage students in creative activities and to provide the resources which replicate a variety of scenarios and situational learning contexts aimed at enabling language learning. Moreover, focus should be placed not only on providing feedback, but also on taking time to discuss it and to clarify any problematic aspect related to errors and grades.

The challenge, however, in both physical and virtual settings, is related to the students' ability to take on increased autonomy; given the fact that not all are innately equipped to be autonomous learners, the responsibility to support and cultivate this trait lies with the teacher. Theoretically, teachers prefer students who are already accustomed to self-teaching, but several possible constraints can also interfere with the educators' openness: the lack of understanding of students' independence, the inability to relinquish their authoritarian status, a rigid curriculum, the lack of experience in classroom management under conditions of increased autonomy of students, the absence of targeted training in their profession, poor adaptation to technologies, the lack of know-how related to the use of digital tools, the management of large groups of students, etc. Fostering learner autonomy might also be perceived as a way to lose control over the classes. In addition, the teachers themselves must be autonomous learners in order to allow their students to become more independent: Guidance and cooperation define a non-authoritative teacher, who is a facilitator, an organiser, a resource person providing learners with feedback and encouragement, and a creator of learning atmosphere and space.³⁹ These are all aspects that must be considered: the quality of the pedagogical act depends on the teachers' well-being and satisfaction, but this aspect lies beyond the scope of this article.

5. Conclusions

The theory of self-determination may be refuted by certain realities and variables which indicate that giving the student the opportunity to become autonomous is not enough for this to happen. For a student to become autonomous, (s)he must have self-confidence and cultivate the habit of doing things independently, developing a solid base of metacognitive knowledge. Autonomy does not lend itself to direct measurement, but we can estimate the degree of learner autonomy according to the level of metacognitive reflection shown. It is a process, a continuum rather than a distinct category, which can vary from group to group or even from student to student depending on the subject, activities, assessment methods, etc. Autonomy therefore remains a fluid concept, which leads to the conclusion that a survey, however elaborate, may aim to identify and investigate some constants, but they remain a fairly blunt instrument. A questionnaire, however, has the advantage of being straightforward and fast to administer, beyond the obvious limitations. Other limitations include the relatively reduced number of participants, the short period of time over which the study extended, and

³⁹ Joshi, *Learner perceptions and teacher beliefs*, 16.

the lack of qualitative data which could have aided in obtaining a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon.

Learner autonomy represents a shifting of responsibilities from teacher to students; it means moving the emphasis from teaching to learning. In the context of institutional learning, complete autonomy is rather unrealistic, since engaging students in every decision (such as timetable, place, resources and materials, or teaching methods) would be unachievable, especially when working with large groups of students. It is, however, viable to promote learner autonomy, by continually revising the curriculum and redesigning the courses, by allowing students to decide upon topics for seminars, debates, projects, and assignments, by giving them a choice regarding the assessment process or methods, by providing them with tools to learn more effectively and to monitor their own progress, etc. Hence, teachers are not expected to halt the teaching process, which would perturb the process of learning, or to completely change their pedagogical strategies. The teacher's role remains consistent, but it is more relevant in terms of creating a learning community with an emphasis on the positive and popular connotations of independence and autonomy. And, to reconsider their views about educator-learner roles, teachers need to become autonomous themselves.